

Moral Exemplarism in the Key of Christ

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Abstract: Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory (EMT) has much to commend it, but without appeal to a single, paradigmatic exemplar, it remains vulnerable to epistemic issues, such as: How do we reliably distinguish between who is admirable and who is not? In this paper, I argue that a Christocentric version of her theory is capable of addressing this problem. The paper's aims are: (1) to demonstrate how teleologically rooting EMT in Christ helps address its epistemic issues, as related specifically to the relationship between individuality and universality, and (2) to present in vivid detail the Christian moral exemplar, using Zagzebski's framework, as a means to both further the first aim and develop its implications. This is achieved through a kind of case study of three (corresponding, I argue) biblical accounts of ascent: Abraham up Moriah, Moses up Sinai, and Christ up Tabor, with special attention given to Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham and Dionysius's interpretation of Moses. Following this case study, I elucidate the virtue, motive, end, and act specific to the Christian moral exemplar.

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI'S *EXEMPLARIST MORAL THEORY* ARTICULATES a new, comprehensive moral theory that takes exemplary moral persons as its foundation.¹ All moral concepts, she argues, find their meaning in direct reference to these exemplary persons, whom we identify via the emotion of admiration. While one might classify exemplarist moral theory (hereafter EMT) as a kind of virtue theory, as it emphasizes virtues more so than deontic terms, Zagzebski differentiates EMT from traditional eudaemonist virtue ethics in that all of its terms—both deontic and virtue—are grounded in exemplary persons.² In centralizing affect and adopting a

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² Zagzebski herself is unsure as to whether her theory fits into the category of “virtue ethics” and concludes that it is “probably not a very important question” (*Exemplarist Moral Theory* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2017], 231).

non-conceptual foundation, Zagzebski advances a moral theory experientially and theoretically comprehensive, resonant with lived human experience, and far-reaching in its application.

Patrick Clark has placed Zagzebski's work in conversation with moral theology, arguing it has much to offer as a Christocentric vision for Thomistic virtue ethics. Clark says that, in response to Vatican II, moral theologians became especially concerned with the relationship between morality and faith, "specifically between the moral agent and the person of Christ."³ This priority, he demonstrates, is reflected in John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*: "The decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather *is Jesus Christ himself*, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: 'In fact, it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man.'"⁴ Clark concludes that, in *Veritatis Splendor*, Christ is "both the mediator of moral norms and their ultimate end."⁵ It is on these grounds that he demonstrates the relevance of Zagzebski's exemplarism for moral theology.

This article aims to demonstrate the reverse; that a Christocentric moral theology is uniquely relevant for EMT. Unlike her earlier, Christian version, as articulated in *Divine Motivation Theory*, EMT does not make the incarnation its central focus. Rather, Zagzebski posits that such an emphasis is not essential to her theory, highlighting its flexibility—it can be appropriated by different faith traditions and philosophical schools. This flexibility derives from the fact that EMT has no central moral exemplar, only "classes" of moral exemplarity. Zagzebski posits three—the hero, the saint, and the sage—each dominated by a particular virtue. However, this list is not exhaustive, as she alludes to the possibility of other classes of exemplarity, making it seem as though inductive generativity could spawn fragmentation *ad infinitum*.

Clark has argued that this decentralized organization of moral exemplarity fails to consider a patent reality:

While it is true that there are as many ways of categorizing exemplars as there are potential exemplars to categorize, the emergence of a dominant paradigm of exemplarity is inevitable. There is always a paradigm *par excellence* which classifies that exemplar or set of exemplars that embody the full measure of human excellence. . . . One

³ Patrick Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 58.

⁴ Cited in Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach," 60. Emphasis added.

⁵ Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach," 60.

must serve as the central prototype, in light of which the others acquire their significance by degrees of relation.⁶

Not only does Clark's critique help EMT correspond with our lived realities, it also identifies a feature I will argue Zagzebski's theory fundamentally requires. Without appeal to a single exemplary paradigm by which all other exemplars are judged, EMT opens itself up to serious epistemic problems, specifically: How do we reliably distinguish between who is admirable and who is not?

Apropos of EMT's epistemic problem, Zagzebski posits two kinds of reasoning: first-person or deliberative reasoning and third-person or theoretical reasoning. First-person reasons pertain to individual experiences, intuitions, and emotions: "They are not reasons for other persons at all. They are irreducibly first personal."⁷ Third-person reasons, on the other hand, "are the reasons to which we refer in communicating with others. They are relevant from anyone's point of view."⁸ EMT exemplifies how a moral theory can be augmented by making room for first-person reasoning, as it hinges epistemically and practically on the capacity for admiration. However, the theory simultaneously exemplifies the difficulty of incorporating first-person reasoning at such a rudimentary level without sacrificing the universal reliability of its epistemic claims. How can EMT maintain the centrality of admiration without excluding productive third-person reasoning between individuals and communities about who is exemplary and who is not?

In this article, I will argue that when teleologically rooted in Jesus Christ as *the* moral exemplar, EMT is able to respond to this epistemic issue in becoming capacious for a certain interaction between first and third-person reasoning, or what I am more generally referring to as the *individual* and *universal*, two fundamental existential axes upon which, I posit, the moral life turns.⁹ By teleologically rooting EMT in Christ, its strengths are maintained and its weaknesses addressed. Through this demonstration, I also elucidate the fundamental nature of the Christian moral exemplar. I posit a deductive set of exemplars, the first two, Abraham and Moses, perfected in a third, Jesus Christ.

⁶ Patrick Clark, "The Particularity of Sanctity: Why Paradigms of Exemplarity Matter for Christian Virtue Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 123, doi.org/10.5840/jsce20194156.

⁷ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, "Epistemic Trust in Others," in *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65.

⁸ Zagzebski, "Epistemic Trust in Others," 64.

⁹ By the *individual* axis, I mean that which pertains to subjectivity, the inner life, whatever is experienced but cannot be communicated. By the *universal* I mean that which pertains to the public sphere, whatever is able to be meaningfully shared, communicated, evidenced, or codified.

To explore their exemplarity, I turn to their corresponding work of ascent: up Moriah (Abraham), up Sinai (Moses), and up Tabor (Christ).

I explore their exemplarity through ascent because I find in it the theological grounds wherein the exemplarity of Christ addresses the epistemic issues in Zagzebski's framing of EMT. The biblical accounts of ascent (by no means exhaustively presented here) culminate in Christ's transfiguration, a robustly eschatological, Christological, and anthropological event¹⁰—relevant to moral theology broadly and EMT specifically at each of these levels. The transfiguration provides a picture of humanity's telos that marks the fulfillment of what God partially revealed in the ascents of Abraham and Moses. Through this case study of ascent, a Christocentric vision of moral exemplarity emerges that bolsters EMT's shortcomings.

My readings of these ascents do not provide a synoptic account of their vast exegetical literature, nor do they intend to. Instead, I focus on Søren Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and Dionysius the Areopagite's interpretation of Moses in the *Mystical Theology*. Their influential—and theologically rich—readings underline certain features of these ascents of special interest to this project. Specifically, each conveys, in its own respect, something fundamental about the relationship between individuality and universality, how they interact in our moral-spiritual formation. These insights, I will show, are especially lucid when read in relation to each other and the transfiguration of Christ, wherein the truths they demonstrate intersect and are consummated.

Examining these accounts of ascent, I explicate the Christian moral exemplar's corresponding virtue, motive, end, and act. I discover that the work of ascent is oriented toward union with God which, contrary to common conceptions, is not a detachment from the problems of ordinary life but, instead, commences their full embrace. Through this elucidation of the Christian moral exemplar, I simultaneously elaborate on how framing EMT Christologically helps address its epistemic issues. This article thus has two basic aims: (1) to argue that teleologically rooting EMT in the person of Christ helps address its epistemic issues, specifically in regard to the relationship between individuality and universality, and (2) to present in vivid detail the Christian moral exemplar, using Zagzebski's framework, as a means to both further the first aim and develop its implications.

The article will progress in the following manner. First, I will identify some of EMT's strengths and why virtue ethicists ought to

¹⁰ Dorothy Lee notes that the purpose of the transfiguration story can be categorized as apocalyptic, epiphanic, and anthropological in *Transfiguration* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 122.

engage it. Second, I will identify its weaknesses and argue that teleologically rooting the theory in Christ enables their overcoming. Third, I move to the case study, wherein I explore the Christian moral exemplar through the ascents of Abraham, Moses, and Christ respectively. Finally, I identify the virtue, motive, end, and act specific to the Christian moral exemplar.

EXEMPLARIST MORAL THEORY: THREE KEY STRENGTHS

While a thorough overview of EMT is beyond the scope of this article, let me begin by highlighting three key strengths of Zagzebski's framework *vis-à-vis* traditional ethical theories: its greater ability to provide practical guidance, "non-conceptual foundationalism," and overcoming of theoretical self-effacement.

First, by appealing to exemplars and the emotion of admiration, EMT is able to address a common objection to virtue ethics, namely, that because it does not contain codifiable rules, it fails to provide practical guidance for how to act in a given situation. Zagzebski's theory subtly shifts the lens, answering the question, "How should I act?" not with "as a virtuous person would act," but instead with, "as a person *like that*, who is virtuous, would act." By grounding the virtues in exemplary lives to which we can directly refer, Zagzebski provides a more concrete, user-friendly approach to the application of virtue.

More broadly, a key strength of Zagzebski's theory is its "non-conceptual foundation."¹¹ Because of this, with EMT, "a little theory goes a long way," as "the framework is simple, but the content is huge."¹² This allows EMT to account for "many qualities that do not easily fit into traditional categories of moral classification," for instance, "what admirable persons hope for, what they dread, whether they have religious faith, how much they value beauty, how they resolve conflict, what gives structure to their lives, what goals they have for civil society."¹³ By making human lives the direct object of moral investigation, EMT brings greater breadth and depth of human experience under the purview of moral discourse. The lack of conceptual framework also is "fortunate," Zagzebski notes, "because very few people have such a framework."¹⁴

By non-conceptual, Zagzebski does not mean non-cognitive, as her theory hinges upon the possibility of objectively true moral judgements. Rather, the rudiments of her theory are not abstract categories but people to whom we can directly point (e.g., *that* is a good person). In other words, of moral exemplars, "we are more

¹¹ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 103.

¹² Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 231–232.

¹³ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 231.

¹⁴ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 231.

certain that they are admirable than we are of *what* is admirable about them.”¹⁵ Thus, terms like duty and virtue find their meaning in and through exemplars, rather than the other way around. Her theory is foundationalist, she argues, and its foundation is *a person like that*, which one identifies via the emotion of admiration.¹⁶ Unlike MacIntyre, Zagzebski does not suggest that we need shared concepts to make moral terms intelligible. Rather, we need shared narratives and emotions, the ability to rationally reflect on those emotions, and the desire to emulate exemplars.¹⁷

Finally, by centralizing the affect, EMT is able to respond to an objection leveraged against versions of deontology, utilitarianism, and more recently, virtue ethics—that they are self-effacing. An ethical theory is self-effacing if the theoretical justification for an action should sometimes not also be the agent’s motivation for performing it.¹⁸ EMT is unique in that the way it identifies and justifies what is good—the emotion of admiration—is also motivating.¹⁹ Zagzebski distinguishes emotion from mere sensation or mood in that it has “an intentional object.”²⁰ According to her, “Emotions can be reasons” and “admiration is a good example of an emotion that operates as a reason.”²¹

Her aforementioned notion of first-person reasons helps clarify what she means here. For Zagzebski, “reasons” are more than evidentiary; they need not hold up in public discourse. They can be reasons even if they are reasons *solely for me*. In the case of admiration, its intentional object is the admirable, which includes moral exemplars. This feeling of admiration safeguards EMT from

¹⁵ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 10.

¹⁶ “The theory I propose is foundational in structure. By that I mean that the entire theory is constructed out of a single point of origin. . . . Instead of starting with a concept, the theory begins with exemplars of moral goodness identified directly by the emotion of admiration” (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 9–10).

¹⁷ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 230.

¹⁸ See Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 14 (1976): 461, doi.org/10.2307/2025782. Stocker demonstrates the self-effacing quality of deontologist and utilitarian theories. Thomas Hurka and Simon Keller have since argued that virtue ethics is also self-effacing. Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Keller, “Virtue Ethics is Self-effacing,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 2, (2007): 221–231, doi.org/10.1080/00048400701343010.

¹⁹ For Zagzebski, “The cognitive and feeling aspects of emotion cannot be detached” (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 34). These are what she calls “thick affective concepts,” described at length in *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Thick affective concepts “are not understandable apart from the disposition to have a feeling of a certain kind, and on a particular occasion” (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 34).

²⁰ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 33.

²¹ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 143.

self-effacement in that it “gives rise to the urge to imitate or emulate” the person admired and is therefore motivating—even transforming.²² In both its organizing structure and epistemic concerns, then, Zagzebski takes moral discourse into territory philosophers have otherwise had difficulty accessing.

AN EMT CORRECTIVE: TELEOLOGICAL ROOTEDNESS IN CHRIST

While EMT provides crucial correctives over against traditional moral theories, its lack of both epistemic reliability and objective orientation requires redress. Below I will demonstrate how teleologically rooting EMT in Christ addresses these concerns.

A first concern is the reliability of the emotion of admiration for recognizing moral exemplars. Zagzebski adopts the Kripkean notion of necessary *a posteriori* truths to describe moral exemplars: they are necessarily²³ admirable and yet discoverable via empirical observation. Her argument for necessary *a posteriori* truths about moral kinds hinges on our ability to identify exemplars’ “deep psychological structure” (where Kripke speaks of identifying a thing’s deep *physical* structure).²⁴ This includes traits like “generosity, fairness, compassion, and others.” A question arises: Can we reliably identify psychological features in the same way we can identify physical ones, given that they are not fully empirically available? Zagzebski assumes that where Kripke makes a necessary link between water and H₂O, she can just as reliably connect “admirable person” to “generosity, fairness, compassion” and other traits. I contend that this is so only if generosity, fairness, compassion, and so on can be measured against and compared with a single, consistent source, namely, a particular paradigmatic exemplar. Ideally, this is an exemplar we take to be perfect.

Zagzebski disagrees:

It is probably not necessary for either theoretical or practical purposes that these exemplars be perfect. If we map a domain of moral concepts around these persons, we can safely ignore their imperfections. This is not hard to do as long as we can recognize their imperfections as imperfections, and we can do that if we can trust our emotion of admiration to distinguish the aspects of their psyche that are admirable from those that are not.²⁵

But can we trust our emotion of admiration to do this—at times very challenging—work of separating the wheat from the chaff without any stable point of reference? Zagzebski anticipates this objection in

²² Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 35.

²³ Their necessity is *de dicto* but not *de re*.

²⁴ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 216.

²⁵ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 153.

chapter two of *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, concluding that, while the emotion of admiration can lead us astray, if it survives “conscientious reflection,” it is justified.²⁶ This seems to beg the question. Wanting to maintain the importance of emotion for recognizing moral exemplars, it ought nevertheless to have surer footing than subjective conscientious reflection. First-person reasoning needs third-person checks and balances.

A second, related concern is the lack of objective orientation. Zagzebski’s “theory of theories” is that they are maps, and a moral map is “useless unless we can find a place where the theory connects to a part of the moral domain we can identify independent of the theory.”²⁷ It needs to provide the user some kind of orientation, a “you are here” marker, something to connect the theory to moral practice. While EMT does indeed provide a “you are here,” the “here” is somewhat meaningless because there is no compass rose: where am *I* in relation to *the* good life? To provide a compass rose, a reference point for all exemplars, and still maintain the foundational nature of exemplarity, the compass itself would need to be an exemplar, a life. The Christian tradition is uniquely suited to respond to this problem, as it posits Christ both as the point of reference who orients all other exemplars and as an exemplary person: the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).²⁸ Unlike all other possible human exemplars, he is perfect—sinless and without moral error—and thus a sure foundation for adjudicating questions about the exemplary status of others. Unlike all other possible divine exemplars, he is incarnate, and thus available for emulation. Therefore, rather than identifying admirable persons as sharing in abstract traits such as generosity and fairness, I here identify them as sharing in these traits *as perfectly manifest in the life of Christ*.

By positing the centrality of Christ, the theory becomes teleological, and EMT finds surer epistemic footing. The non-teleological aspect of exemplarism is in large part what distinguishes Zagzebski’s theory from other virtue theories, especially of the eudaemonistic variety.²⁹ Zagzebski is against making her theory teleological primarily because she sees this as a move away from her “non-conceptual” starting point. Again, her foundation is *a person like that*, not an ambiguous abstraction like “the good life.” However, if the theory is teleologically oriented to the life of Jesus, her theory

²⁶ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 50.

²⁷ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 7.

²⁸ Zagzebski’s theory diverges from Kripke’s where he argues for the necessity of natural kinds *de dicto* and *de re*. She does not posit the exemplarity of admirable persons *de re* (as being exemplary in all possible worlds). However, Zagzebski does note that Jesus Christ would be the exception to this, as he is essentially good. This substantiates my claim here of Christ’s unique admirability.

²⁹ Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 31.

continues to be founded on *a person like that* whilst avoiding the pitfalls that come without a telos. In allowing the theory to become teleologically rooted in Christ, exemplarism addresses its epistemic shortcomings while maintaining its strengths.

When rooted in Christ, EMT arguably becomes even more explicitly exemplarist, founded in an admirable person and not a set of traits common to admirable persons. As Maria Vaccarezza notes in her review of *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, “One wonders what is most fundamental in the theory: is it the exemplar, or the virtues which constitute her/his psychological structure, and whose possession makes one a real exemplar, as opposed to a fake one?”³⁰ This is a good question given Zagzebski’s argument for using natural kinds to directly refer to moral exemplars:

- (1E) Necessarily, to be a good person is to be the same in admirability as persons like that.
- (2E) To be the same in admirability as persons like that consists in having the same deep psychological structure as they have.
- (3E) The deep psychological structure of persons like that consists in the following traits: generosity, fairness, compassion, and others.
- (4E) Therefore, necessarily, to be a good person is to have the traits listed under (3E).³¹

Following 4E, one is led to believe that the traits listed under 3E, “generosity, fairness, compassion, and others” are what the theory is in fact founded upon, rather than the exemplars themselves.

Taking Christ as the moral exemplar, the argument can be modified as follows:

- (1C) Necessarily, to be a good person is to be like Jesus Christ in admirability.³²
- (2C) To be like Jesus Christ in admirability consists in living like he did.
- (3C) Jesus Christ lived a perfectly admirable life because of his union with God.³³
- (4C) To live like Jesus Christ consists in being teleologically oriented to union with God.

³⁰ Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, “Review of *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, by L. T. Zagzebski,” *Dialectica* 72, no. 4 (2018): 639, doi.org/10.1111/1746-8361.12248.

³¹ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 222–223.

³² I replace “same” with “like” insofar as Jesus Christ’s nature as God incarnate moves beyond human natural kinds, yet as fully human remains irreducibly unique, per Zagzebski’s theory.

³³ *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that the perfection of Christ’s humanity is based on its hypostatic union with his divine nature (no. 22). See also 1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, and 1 Peter 1:19.

- (5C) Jesus Christ is the one through whom union with God is possible.³⁴
- (6C) Therefore, to be a good person is to live like Jesus Christ, which requires teleological orientation to union with God and thereby Jesus Christ.

With this Christological formulation, an exemplarism emerges which is not founded in traits but in a person, an exemplar.

I demonstrate the source and strengths of this formulation in the case study to follow. I will argue that in Christ, union between the individual and universal is effected. This union makes possible a kind of subjectivity not divorced from our responsibility to others, not at odds with an ethics that can be reliably codified, tested, and communicated. This approach helps anticipate the unreliability of moral judgments not only of individuals but also of entire communities—it anticipates the shortcomings of both first and third-person reasoning, of individual and universal. Zagzebski says of exemplars that they “embody the qualities most admired in a community. We see our highest ideals in the face of our exemplars.”³⁵ But we need an exemplar who can raise a community to a higher standard, not one that merely reflects its image. In Christ, *the* exemplar, the individual and universal can exist in tandem while remaining distinct, bolstering the possibility of an EMT that stands the test of individuals and communities with flawed admiration and reflection on that admiration.

A TRIADIC CASE STUDY

In accordance with a theory that aims to make exemplary persons more basic than the virtues they exemplify, I begin this investigation by examining persons—Abraham, Moses, and Christ—in a kind of case study. Only after investigating the ascents of these three will I seek to define the virtue, motive, end, and act specific to both their moral exemplarism and all Christian moral exemplars insofar, as I will demonstrate, as the Christian moral exemplar must be understood in reference to all three.³⁶ To explicate the moral significance of Abraham’s ascent, I will draw on Kierkegaard, specifically what he describes as Abraham’s teleological suspension of the ethical. For

³⁴ See John 14:6.

³⁵ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 233.

³⁶ I adopt Zagzebski’s definitions for each of these: “(1) A *virtue* is a trait we admire in an exemplar. It is a trait that makes a person like that admirable in a certain respect. (2) A *good motive* is a motive we admire in an exemplar. It is a motive of a person like that. (3) A *good end* is a state of affairs that exemplars aim to bring about. It is the state of affairs at which persons like that aim. (4) A *virtuous act* is an admirable act, an act we admire in a person like that” (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 21).

Moses's, I will draw on Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, to identify an inverse to the Abrahamic teleological suspension of the universal, which I will argue corresponds to a move Charles Stang has named self-apophasis.³⁷ Finally, I will locate the culmination of the Abrahamic and Mosaic ascents in Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the ensuing events it foreshadows.

I bring together Abraham, Moses, and Christ for a number of reasons. Joseph Schultz notes that throughout the Bible and rabbinic literature, Moriah and Sinai "are seen as links between heaven and earth."³⁸ He cites Jacob's dream of the ladder, for example—later interpreted as taking place while he slept on Moriah—as an example of the mountain's function as "*axis mundi*" (cosmic axis).³⁹ Sinai, he says, fulfills this same function, presented in Exodus as a site of "the transcendent becoming immanent, of the omnipresent becoming localized."⁴⁰ Greg Beale demonstrates how mountain and temple imagery are so closely associated throughout the Hebrew Bible, further indicating its status as a location of divine presence.⁴¹ Thus, it is clear that the mountain is a place of God's special presence and, moreover, that the drama of ascending and descending is central to theme of divine distance and presence throughout the Scriptures. This theme of divine distance and presence is particularly apt for explicating Christ as the paradigmatic moral exemplar, because God's nearness to humanity culminates in him, and this work of drawing near to God is central to our imitation of Christ.

Throughout this case study, I will use the word "suspension" in keeping with and as an extension of what Kierkegaard suggests of Abraham's leap of faith (that it is a "teleological suspension of the ethical"). Likewise, in keeping with Pseudo-Dionysius's description of Moses's ascent, I also use "apophasis." It is important to note, however, that by suspension and apophasis I do not mean something *ultimately* negatory, but rather, an *ekstasis*—a stepping outside oneself (or some aspect of oneself). It is not ultimately a negation in that

³⁷ Stang develops this idea drawing on the apophatic anthropology of Bernard McGinn, Denys Turner, and Thomas Tomasic. See Thomas Tomasic, "Negative Theology and Subjectivity: An Approach to the Tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1969): 406–430, doi.org/10.5840/ipq 19699333.

³⁸ Joseph P. Schultz, "From Sacred Space to Sacred Object to Sacred Person in Jewish Antiquity," *Shofar*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1993): 31, doi.org/10.1353/sho.1993.0106.

³⁹ Martin Luther, for example, posited this connection. See Weimarer Ausgabe 43.596.25. This *axis mundi* or cosmic axis refers to the point at which heaven and earth, or the higher and lower realms, more generally, meet. See Mircea Eliade, "Symbolism of the Centre," in *Images and Symbols*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 48.

⁴⁰ Schultz, "From Sacred Space to Sacred Object," 31.

⁴¹ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 145–148.

whatever is suspended, stepped outside of, or surpassed, is finally returned in a fuller sense. Thus, instead of a kind of cancelling, it denotes the anticipation of a deeper affirmation. In the suspending, nothing is lost; in the sacrificing, as we shall see, everything is gained.

Abraham

In Genesis 22:2, God commands Abraham, “Now take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go toward the land of Moriah. Offer him there on one of the mountains which I shall tell you.”⁴² The text describes this as God נסה Abraham, which, in the piel (as it is here), is best rendered *tests* or *trains*.⁴³ God requires Abraham to surrender his son, whom he loves, for some spiritually—and as we shall see, morally—pedagogical purpose. What does he intend to teach him?

Johannes *de silentio*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym in *Fear and Trembling*, identifies this test as a lesson in the supremacy of God over and above all universal-ethical considerations—a lesson in faith. In adhering to God’s command, Abraham must *leap* beyond “the ethical” or the *Sittlichkeit*⁴⁴—the existential sphere Kierkegaard equates with the universal—to become *the single individual before God*. Abraham responded to God’s command with unquestioning obedience, as he “rose early in the morning” (Genesis 22:3) traveled “to the place which God had told them” (22:9) and there prepared to sacrifice Isaac. This move beyond the universal-ethical is what Johannes calls Abraham’s teleological suspension of “the ethical.” By doing so, Abraham places himself before the judgment of God alone. Johannes makes the suspension of universality key to Abraham’s leap of faith because, as Merold Westphal explains, if instead the ethical is “absolutized” (as it is in Hegel), “that would mean that our relation to God is so thoroughly mediated via the social order that faith becomes indistinguishable from socialization, and the individual’s relation to

⁴² Textual translations in this article are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴³ Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baumgartner, Benedikt Hartmann, and M. E. J. Richardson, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), s.v. “נסה.”

⁴⁴ *Sittlichkeit* is the Hegelian notion of the “ethical life,” discussed at length in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. It pertains to an entire people and their customs. Kierkegaard’s “ethical” stage of existence corresponds to *Sittlichkeit*, referring to “norms and principles which are accepted by a group and set forth as proper guides or directives for moral action.” Thus, “the ethical” is here characterized by “objectivity, general or universal validity, and presumable rational intelligibility” (Calvin O. Schrag, “Note on Kierkegaard’s Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,” *Ethics* 70, no. 1 [1959]: 66–68, doi.org/10.1086/291244).

God is no longer a personal one.”⁴⁵ Johannes argues that, when the universally ethical becomes the absolute, the individual is made to “annul his singularity.”⁴⁶ To do so is diametrically opposed to the life of faith according to Johannes because “Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal.”⁴⁷

With this instance of God *נסו* (*testing, training*) Abraham, the problem of the relationship between individuality and universality emerges with all its difficulties. Johannes posits the superiority of individuality in matters of faith, distinguishing it from how nineteenth century Danish Christendom (under the influence of Hegel) had come to understand the life of faith (according to Kierkegaard)—a club membership that made no real demands of individual persons, a passionless life of benign speculation. Kierkegaard and Hegel both conceptualized the self as existing in a kind of dialectic between particularity and universality posited in a third, *spirit*. A key difference between these accounts, however, is that Hegel’s notion of *Geist* (Spirit) indicates a certain resolution of the two terms. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, sees this dialectic as fundamentally unfinished, always in the process of becoming on this side of eternity. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the human person cannot systematically explain away the tension these two axes create, because a system is only coherent if complete, and we are essentially incomplete. Therefore, there is no sense in which Abraham’s individuality could be sublated into a higher unity with his universality, as Hegel might like, and so he must instead live in faith at the site of their paradox—a paradox, as will become clear, that finds ultimate expression and union in Christ. Thus, Johannes correctly recognizes the Abrahamic ascent as standing in contradistinction to an exhaustively universal ethics.

And yet, a full understanding of Christian ethics does not end with Abraham; it is only the beginning. Westphal says that the teleological suspension is really about “the ultimate source of the Moral Law,”⁴⁸ which, we discover through Abraham, is God. The content of that moral law, however, still remains to be examined, requiring attention to how the individual of faith might relate to a universal-ethical that lies beyond the products of human reason and custom, beyond the *Sittlichkeit*. Importantly, this progression towards a fuller depiction of the religious-ethical life is in keeping with what Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis refers to in the introduction to the

⁴⁵ Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 77.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 54.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55.

⁴⁸ Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110.

Concept of Anxiety as a “second ethics” that “presupposes dogmatics.”⁴⁹ And so, in suspending the universal and thereby faithfully ascending Moriah, Abraham retrieves the individual axis of the Christian life, but not for its own sake. Rather, in giving the gift of faith, with Abraham as its midwife, God promises to him a people—a new universal,⁵⁰ born into the lineage of faith. To explore this new universal, this “second ethics,” I first turn to Moses who, like Abraham, performs a “leap of faith,” albeit across a different chasm.

Moses

In Exodus 20:20 God is *נס* (*testing, training*) again. This time, however, the object is plural—Abraham was tested (individual) and now an entire people (universal). After announcing the ten commandments, Moses tells the Israelites, “Do not fear; God has come to *נס* you so that the fear of him may be upon you, in order that you may not sin.” In response, “the people stood from afar,” while Moses “drew near to the thick darkness in which God was” (20:21). God appoints Moses as an emissary relaying his moral instruction to the Israelites and so, like Abraham, he must *ascend*. However, while the ascent of Abraham requires teleologically suspending the universal, that of Moses requires teleologically suspending the individual. The teleological suspension of the universal is marked by Abraham’s inability to rationalize his duty in ethical terms to others—terms that would intelligibly justify his action to a body politic.⁵¹ Conversely, the teleological suspension of the individual is marked by Moses’s inability to rationalize the possibility of his duty to *himself*.

God first selects Moses as his emissary in Exodus 3. Moses is filled with self-doubt, saying “I am not eloquent . . . but I am slow of speech

⁴⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Albert Anderson, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 24. Thanks to Jeffrey Hanson for drawing my attention to this, which he discusses in his review of Roe Fremstedal’s *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion* for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2022, November 19) and at greater length in his book *Kierkegaard and the Life of Faith* (2017).

⁵⁰ The term “universal,” as employed in this section and the next, is in reference to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* and is thus not meant to denote all people everywhere (at least not yet), but rather the customs and values shared by a group or community of people. Therefore, while the code of law God gives the Israelites is only at first for that community and not for all people everywhere, I still employ “universal” to denote that it stands in contradistinction to “individual,” as it pertains to shared customs and values. Basically, “universal” should be understood in terms of universal quantification, $\forall$, true of all values in a given set.

⁵¹ Hence, silence is a key theme in Kierkegaard’s exegesis of the Abrahamic ascent. Abraham is unable to speak of what he is doing—to his son, wife, anyone. See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 10, 12, 21.

and tongue" (4:10). Yet God responds by reminding Moses that it is God who gives speech to one's mouth and assures him that "I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say" (4:12). When God is instructing Moses what to tell the Israelites, he begins each time with the phrase *כֹּה תֹאמַר*, *you shall say thus*. This phrase connotes that Moses is to relay God's instruction "word for word,"⁵² again emphasizing his role as an ecstatic vessel, a surrogate for the speech of God.

Moses believed himself incapable of carrying out the enormous responsibility God was giving him, and yet he proceeded. He took on the fate of an entire nation even though he felt ill-equipped to do so. This is what I mean by a teleological suspension of the individual—Moses's self-concept was interrupted, held in abeyance. This move is inversely related to Abraham's because, where Abraham's suspension is *interpersonal*, Moses's is *intrapersonal*.

This teleological suspension of the individual is evident in Pseudo-Dionysius's treatment of Moses's ascent.⁵³ In *Mystical Theology*, he notes that when "the knowledge of ignorance enters the truly mysterious,"⁵⁴ when Moses *draws near to the thick darkness*, he becomes "neither of himself nor of another."⁵⁵ This ascetic practice of self-effacement is that whereby the words of God permeate the very speech of Moses, such that he is no longer his own.⁵⁶ This apophasis of self is exemplified in his ascent up Sinai, the task in which, "being of that which is beyond everything and of no one else,"⁵⁷ Moses communes in a new way with God and, thereby, so does an entire people.

Just as the Abrahamic and Mosaic ascents are inversely related in what they suspend, so too they are inversely related in what they retrieve. Abraham makes the apophatic ascent to retrieve a fuller revelation of the individual, thereby discovering the individual in

⁵² Jacob Benno, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1992), 525.

⁵³ Stang calls this an "apophasis of the self." See Charles Stang, "Being Neither Oneself nor Someone Else," in *Apophatic Bodies, Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 59–76; "'No Longer I': The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153–197.

⁵⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1001A.

⁵⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1001A.

⁵⁶ Stang characterizes self-apophasis thus: "Apophasis is best understood as a sort of asceticism that delivers a self that is as unknown as the God with whom it seeks to suffer union" ("No Longer I," 135).

⁵⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1001A.

faith.⁵⁸ Moses makes the apophatic ascent to retrieve a fuller revelation of the universal—a code of law permitting communion with God for the Israelite nation. The Abrahamic event pertains to the single individual (as Kierkegaard would have it), but as he is promised the multiplication of his lineage, it lays the foundation for a new universal. Moses thus emerges within this universal, receiving not a singular sacrifice, but instruction for continual sacrifice. Abraham’s ascent initiates; Moses’s ascent *sustains* and *universalizes*. The *עלה* (burnt offering) of Abraham is singular (Genesis 22:13), but that which God codifies for Moses and the Israelites is *תמיד* (continual incense offering) (Exodus 29:42, 30:8). Abraham’s ascent unifies him with God. Moses’s ascent unifies an entire people with God.

Christ

Aquinas says regarding the significance of the transfiguration, “Now it is necessary that for anyone to go straight along a road, they must somehow foresee the end.”⁵⁹ Thus, any teleologically oriented moral theory presupposes the possibility of some kind of insight into this telos or end, a foretaste to inspire and instruct progress in its direction.

Why locate the transfiguration as *the* culminating ascent, rather than, say, Jesus’s ascension into heaven, or his ascent up Golgotha? My rationale concerns the specific theological significance of ascent across scripture, namely, its function as revelatory, communicative of God’s nature and nearness. While every ascent of Jesus functions in this way (every moment of his life, in fact), the transfiguration does especially. The transfiguration makes explicit the mission of the Son of God, that he came to unite humanity with God and does so by being both human and God. We see first in the transfiguration the true nature of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human and, thereby and simultaneously, the possibility of union with God (even if not yet knowing the means by which this will become available—that is, the cross). We find in the transfiguration a preview of the resurrection, not only Christ’s, but our own too—a foretaste of the new heaven and earth. In a way, the transfiguration operates as a microcosm for the entire mission of Christ. As Arthur Ramsey notes, the transfiguration “expresses in a remarkable way the unity of the doctrines of Creation, the Incarnation, the Cross, the Spirit, the Church, and the world-to-

⁵⁸ I refer to both of these mystical ascents as apophatic because they require that Abraham and Moses, respectively, “*unsay*” something—for Abraham, his universality and for Moses, his individuality.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 45, a. 1.

come.”⁶⁰ The Transfiguration’s special importance for moral theology and the current project is clear in Dorothy Lee’s description:

In the end, it is as much about their [the disciples’ and the world’s] transfiguration, the luminous glory shining in the ordinariness of their flesh, as it is about Jesus’s transformation. The transfiguration on the mountain is the meeting-place between human beings and God, between the temporal and eternal, between past, present, and future, between everyday human life—with all its hopes and fear—and the mystery of God. The attachment between them, at every point, is Jesus himself. The transfiguration presents him dressed in the garments of divine light yet clothed also in the garb of creation. He is the point of intersection, the bridge between heaven and earth, the source of hope, bringing to birth—through the incarnation, death, and resurrection—God’s eschatological future.⁶¹

The transfiguration is *the* revelation of our end, not only in providing a literal image of our telos in the person of Christ, but also in that God the Father here designates him as our authority: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5). Here is the only command we get from God the Father in the entire New Testament. This ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ (listen to him) is foundational for Christian ethics. All authority is here granted to Jesus by the Father himself, to whom Jesus calls us to be alike in completion (Matthew 5:48). When Peter, James, and John lift their eyes, they see Ἰησοῦν μόνον (Jesus alone), their sole authority. He tells them, “Rise, and do not fear” (17:7), a call Abraham and Moses heed faithfully and Christ himself models.

While the Abrahamic ascent rediscovers humanity’s individuality and the Mosaic ascent rediscovers humanity’s universality, Christ’s transfiguration points to their right relation, found in union with God—subsequently made possible in Christ’s death and resurrection, what this event foreshadows. These existential axes have shaped the Christian moral exemplar’s development through Abraham and Moses but culminate in Christ’s transfiguration, wherein the eschatological telos of humanity is manifest. In the person of Christ, both the universal and individual find their completion: humanity is universally reconciled with God through his perfect adherence to Mosaic law,⁶² and, simultaneously, the individual person is made capacious to

⁶⁰ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 5.

⁶¹ Lee, *Transfiguration*, 2.

⁶² See John 8:31–59 and Craig Keener’s description of the significance of the pericope in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 762–763.

receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through Christ's obedience to God, who thereby found and brings to completion their faith.⁶³

In relating to each of these two existential axes perfectly, Christ teleologically suspends the individual and universal, simultaneously and to an infinitely greater degree than would be comprehensible for Abraham or Moses. This becomes apparent in his death on the cross. He teleologically suspends the universal in silently receiving the fatal consequence of an unjust declaration of human law: that he, of whom Pilate declared, "I find nothing culpable in this man" (Luke 23:4), ought to die the death of a blasphemer. If Abraham must suspend the universal in preparing to kill his son, Christ must all the moreso in being crucified by the Roman state; he dies the death ultimately not required from Abraham to exact upon Isaac. In this way, Christ performs what was prefigured in the Abrahamic ascent to a supreme degree, effectively producing the possibility of faith not only for an individual, but for all.

The fulfillment of Mosaic self-apophasis is also present in Christ's death on the cross. Here lies the culmination of his self-emptying love (Philippians 2:5–8), becoming human to the point of death. Moses suspends his individuality for Israel's sake, becoming *neither of himself nor of another*, and Christ suspends his individual will for the sake of all humanity, becoming entirely receptive to that of God.⁶⁴ Through Moses's self-apophasis, he receives a universal code of law, a law given to a particular people (Israel) for the world. Christ's suspension of the individual, however, makes this finitely universal law applicable to all peoples for all times. In other words, by perfectly fulfilling the finitely bound Mosaic law⁶⁵—going up that mountain, so to speak—Christ returns not with a new set of stone tablets, but a law to be written on human hearts.

The double-move Christ performs is the fulfillment/perfection of both Abrahamic and Mosaic ascents, completing this triptych of the Christian moral exemplar and thereby making its telos lucid. This dialectical movement from individual to universal is brought finally into union with God—not Hegelian synthesis. The union of these existential axes is possible only by way, and is in fact part of, the union

⁶³ Jesus is the ἀρχηγός (founder) and τελειωτὴν (perfecter) of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Paul Ellingworth translates as "source and goal" and "pioneer and finisher" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993], 640).

⁶⁴ This is not to say that he negates his divinity. Instead, it is precisely at this apparent nadir wherein the divinity of Christ is revealed most vividly.

⁶⁵ Jesus came to πληρῶσαι (fulfill) the law (see Matthew 5:17–48). He did not, however, come to καταλῶσαι (abolish) it. The verb πληρῶσαι "plays a prominent role . . . where it denotes the coming into being of that to which Scripture pointed forward" (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 182).

simultaneously effected between human (and humanity) with God. The reconciliation promised in Christ's transfiguration is characterized not by *Aufhebung* (sublimation) but resurrection. The difference is that, for one, resurrection does not bring God and humanity together by cognitive exertion but through true nearness, a nearness which does not render anything of the individual human person superable or extraneous, but in fact raises all of it into the new heaven and earth where God chooses to dwell with humanity eternally.

VIRTUE, MOTIVE, END, AND ACT

Having outlined this triadic ascent—suspension of the universal, suspension of the individual, and these axes' reconciliation—I now turn to examining the Christian moral exemplar according to EMT. Zagzebski holds that each class of exemplars has a particular virtue, good motive, good end, and virtuous act.⁶⁶ By direct reference to the work of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, I discover the Christian moral exemplar's foundational virtue as faith, their good motive as ecstatic love, their good end as union with God, and their virtuous act as ascent and descent. In outlining these facets of the Christian moral exemplar, I hope to provide a kind of map legend—a modest one, to be sure—for the emulation (the method by which we ourselves become like exemplars, according to Zagzebski) of Christ.⁶⁷

Virtue: Faith

Though exemplars may have many virtues, Zagzebski identifies each as having a dominant one. According to her, a virtue is “a trait we admire in an exemplar,” one that “makes a *person like that* admirable in a certain respect.”⁶⁸ Having examined the ascents of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, I posit faith as their foundational virtue. This does not mean, of course, that they possess no other virtues; a fuller account would examine all three theological virtues together. In keeping with Zagzebski's framework, however, I select one. Faith is examined here instead of love not because it is more important, but because it is logically prior, first of the virtues by nature.⁶⁹ Moreover, I choose faith because of its resonance with this particular case study and the work of ascent/descent broadly. It should be noted that, according to Aquinas, Christ does not have faith, because faith, he argues, involves a defect. He does say, however, that Christ has

⁶⁶ Zagzebski's theory makes room for more than these four terms in describing exemplars, but I focus on them exclusively due to the fact that they seem to be the most basic—both in EMT and my own analysis.

⁶⁷ See Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, “Emulation,” 129–155.

⁶⁸ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 21. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq. 4 and 7.

“whatever is perfect in faith . . . most perfectly,”⁷⁰ and that Christ “is presented to all as an example through faith.”⁷¹ In accord with Aquinas’ position, then, Christ’s obedience is here taken as illustrative of that perfection towards which the faith of Abraham and Moses—and all moral exemplars following Christ—point. Thus, faith does not delimit the virtuous life, but is nevertheless fundamental in moving towards its end.

The author of Hebrews calls faith (πίστις) “the realization of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” (11:1).⁷² Per this definition, faith is twofold, an event (ὕπόστασις) and a posture (ἐλεγχος). Thus, the virtue of faith is best described as a participation in this event of ὑπόστασις (realization) that assumes the posture of ἐλεγχος (conviction). The event of faith, this realization of things hoped for, is invisible—inaccessible to human faculties in some profound sense. Categorizing faith as a theological rather than intellectual virtue, Aquinas notes that it deals with “invisible things, which go beyond human reason.”⁷³ Thus, this virtuous participation involves a surpassing of particular faculties. This work of suspending one’s worldly vision for eyes of faith is exemplified in the Abrahamic teleological suspension of the universal and the Mosaic self-apophysis, each expressing—with increasing intensity—this convicted participation in the realization of things hoped for. Finally, Christ’s self-emptying love exemplifies the end to which they both point.

Faith is notably attributed to Abraham not only by Kierkegaard, who famously designates him *the knight of faith*, but also by Saint Paul, who calls him the “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11). He is the progenitor of all faithful people insofar as he is the first example⁷⁴ of this obedient participation of which the author of Hebrews speaks. Allowing his sight to move beyond things seen—*leaping*, to use Kierkegaard’s word—Abraham comes to know the realization of God’s promises through this posture of conviction. What begins here in *the single individual before God* is then multiplied into generations, true to God’s promise.

Gregory of Nyssa compares the virtuous life—which, according to him, Moses exemplifies—to a pomegranate, “covered with a hard and

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 7, a. 9, ad 1.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 41, a. 2, ad 1. Nevertheless, as the definition of virtue here employed is Zagzebski’s and not Aquinas’, this examination of faith does not intend to be expressly Thomistic.

⁷² See Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “ὕπόστασις,” definition 1b.

⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 32, a. 1.

⁷⁴ Of course, there are figures who predate Abraham and act in ways that resemble faith (e.g., Noah), but the first time the Hebrew word נָאֵם (believe) appears in the Hebrew Bible is in reference to Abraham (Gen 15:6).

sour rind, its outside is inedible, but the inside is a pleasant sight . . . full of good hopes when it ripens.”⁷⁵ The essence of the Christian moral exemplar’s goodness is discovered in this sacrificial, ascetic discipline, forgoing certain faculties or aspects of existence, looking forward always to their fuller realization on the other side of ascent. Pseudo-Dionysius describes the ascent of Moses as a process of carving away preconceptions, seeking the pith of God’s beauty beyond the limitations of propositional descriptions, becoming like “self-made statues.”⁷⁶ Nyssa also employs the image of a sculptor to articulate Moses’s faithful ascent of Sinai.⁷⁷ This imagery aptly depicts the Christian moral exemplar’s work of suspending things seen for the participation in those unseen. By faith, Moses drew near to the *קִרְבָּן* (thick darkness) of God’s dwelling (Exodus 20:22), carving away consideration of his independent person as he sought to discover the universal implications of God’s promises, the faith event being established for the Israelites, and the posture appropriate to it.

Though keenly attuned to the unseen, the Christian moral exemplar’s faith is not escapist by any means. In fact, ascent only makes sense within the context of its corollary: descent (as will be discussed in section below, entitled “Act: Ascent/Descent”). Kierkegaard describes Abraham’s faith as “a faith specifically for this life—faith that he would grow old in this country, be honored among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac.”⁷⁸ Abraham’s faith is so great that, even in his infinite resignation,⁷⁹ he still believes he will get it all back, that Isaac will be returned to him.⁸⁰ The Christian moral exemplar moves sacrificially, but always eschatologically expectant, hopeful and concerned with tomorrow. The life of faith suspends but does not do so despairingly, instead joyfully, looking ahead always to the restoration of all, the opening of heaven, and final descent of our King (Revelation 11:19).

The virtue of faith and the perfection to which it points are thus not to be misunderstood as having a naïve or quietist relation to the ethical. Abraham ascends Moriah expectant of a descent marked by God’s abundant mercy; Moses ascends Sinai for the sake of descending with a code of law for his people; Christ’s transfiguration reveals his perfection not to establish distance from imperfection but ultimately to dwell infinitely nearer in the hearts of human beings. The Christian

⁷⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist, 1978), 104.

⁷⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1025B.

⁷⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 134.

⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 21.

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard calls “infinite resignation” that move in which the knight of faith loosens their grip on everything they know, have, and hold dear; a complete surrendering.

⁸⁰ See Hebrews 11:19. This theme is also readily apparent in Job 42:10.

moral exemplars are thus not to be conceived as somehow needlessly esoteric or inaccessible. Rather, they venture the daunting heights of unknowing for the sake of knowing God more fully—individually and corporately—in ordinary existence. It is precisely this that their faith is about and oriented toward. Abraham suspends the universal and descends with a deeper knowledge of God’s presence in the individual task of faith; Moses suspends his self-concept, descending with God’s commands for a people; Christ suspends both, giving to us the gift of God’s presence, for the individual and all of humanity.

Motive: Ecstatic Love

I turn now to the “good motive” of the Christian moral exemplar, what Zagzebski defines as “a motive we admire in an exemplar . . . a motive of a person like that.”⁸¹ I posit ecstatic love as the admirable good motive in Abraham, Moses, and Christ—and thereby all Christian moral exemplars

Love effects union with God, the end of the Christian moral exemplars, by taking them outside themselves in some respect. Abraham was ecstatically removed from the universal, Moses from the individual, and Christ from both. This displacing love allows one to recognize the essence of their identity as grounded in their belongingness to God. Becoming neither oneself nor someone else, the Christian moral exemplar experiences God’s own yearning love, which finds ultimate expression in Christ.⁸² At the height of God’s ecstatic love for humanity, God became “one with us in our lowliness.”⁸³ Through Christ’s self-revelation, “our shadowed and unshaped minds” were given “a loveliness suitable to their divinized state.”⁸⁴ The climax of love’s ecstasy, therefore, was also the point of reconciliation, union between God and human. Union is accomplished by love and therefore necessarily self-sacrificial, self-displacing—a dominant feature of this triptych.

In this way, union is brought about kenotically: Christ emptied himself so that we might know the love of God and thereby, following his example, empty ourselves to be filled with the grace of God through the Spirit’s indwelling, paradoxically becoming fuller, more capacious to love God and neighbor likewise. To clarify what is meant by “kenotic,” I submit John Betz’s elucidation (drawing on Przywara) of divine humility, that it is nothing new or heterodox, but simply “the

⁸¹ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 21.

⁸² Pseudo-Dionysius, *DN*, 712B.

⁸³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH*, 441A.

⁸⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *EH*, 441B. Translation from Colm P. Luibhéid and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987).

depths—the bathos—of divine love.”⁸⁵ Betz reconciles Balthasar and Aquinas on this question by distinguishing between a humility of obligatory submission, which is Aquinas’s definition (hence his rejection of its status as a divine attribute), and “the voluntary humility of love which submits to another out of love (see Eph 5:25).”⁸⁶ God’s humility is the latter, a humility that does not signify weakness or disproportion in God, but “strength, indeed, divine virtue.”⁸⁷ And so, we are to see that “in God majesty and humility are one . . . that by emptying himself he fills all things (Eph 1:23).”⁸⁸

Fully revealed in the life of Christ, this humble love of God is attested in the faith of Abraham and Moses. Abraham’s teleological suspension of the universal does not result from a lack of concern for Isaac but actually out of profound love for him, believing that obedience to God’s just and loving—though inscrutable—nature would surely sustain and deepen the bonds between him and his son, his son and God. Abraham is taken outside himself, ecstatically removed from his usual role as Isaac’s protective and nurturing father. Through this distance from his normal and prescribed role in Isaac’s life, his faith in God and love for Isaac are deepened simultaneously. This displacing love drives the project of the Christian moral exemplar forward, creating space within their finitude for God’s infusion of faith. Likewise, Moses, out of love for God’s people, is obedient to God’s command even when he knows nothing of his capacity to fulfill it. He enters the thick darkness, allowing his own self-concept to be surpassed, and does so from a lowly posture of profound love for the Israelites, that they may know God, that God may dwell among them.

End: Union with God

Having examined the virtue and motive of the Christian moral exemplar, I attend to their end, that which Zagzebski defines as, “a state of affairs that exemplars aim to bring about . . . the state of affairs at which *persons like that* aim.”⁸⁹ Because Zagzebski’s formulation of the theory is non-teleological, she allows each class of exemplar their own end, as there is no overarching telos binding them together. However, because I am arguing for an explicitly teleological version of her theory, the end I describe of the Christian moral exemplar is the end of human life full-stop. The Christian moral exemplar, and all human beings, are oriented towards the perfection found in the life of Christ—specifically, in union with God.

⁸⁵ John Betz, “The Humility of God: On a Disputed Question in Trinitarian Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* 17, no. 3 (2019): 808, doi.org/10.1353/nov.2019.0052.

⁸⁶ Betz, “The Humility of God,” 805.

⁸⁷ Betz, “The Humility of God,” 806.

⁸⁸ Betz, “The Humility of God,” 809.

⁸⁹ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 21. Emphasis mine.

That this triadic movement points toward union with God can be seen in its structural similitude to the three stages of the spiritual life: purgation, illumination, and union. Though all three exemplars perform all three movements, each corresponds to one in particular: Abraham with purgation, Moses with illumination, and Christ with union. I associate Abraham most closely with purgation because his task is chiefly ascetic, infinitely resigning any and all universally-socially conditioned conceptions of duty to remain obedient to the command of God. I characterize Moses's ascent as a kind of illumination insofar as God reveals to him the law, an illumination not only for Moses, but for all Israelites. Finally, Christ exemplifies union as he reconciles all of humanity to God in his life, death, and resurrection.

By end, or telos, I do not mean that union with God marks a stopping point in the moral journey of the Christian exemplar. Their exemplarity is not static but a dynamic overflowing of this union. Also, I do not mean to suggest that the Christian exemplar only becomes exemplary upon achieving this union. Rather, the Christian exemplar is exemplary in their pursuit of this union, receiving foretastes along the way that animate their moral character and evoke admiration. What is important is that they are always oriented to and/or from union. As will be discussed in the next section, this orientation involves both ascending and descending.

Act: Ascent/Descent

Having discussed the Christian exemplar's virtue, motive, and end, I discover the presence of all three in what Zagzebski calls "virtuous acts," which are "the acts that express virtues."⁹⁰ In expressing an exemplar's virtue, they also express their motive and end, as all four are inextricably linked. The Christian moral exemplar's virtuous act, ascent, is accompanied by an oft-overlooked corollary: descent—to both of which I now turn. Via this final examination of ascent and descent, I draw out a fact I have been building up to: the pursuit of union with God—and that union itself—does not involve detachment from ordinary life but marks deeper engagement with it.

Returning to Kierkegaard, his problem with Hegelianism is, at base, its attempt to provide a complete systematic account of human existence. Existence is a system for God, Kierkegaard says, "but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit."⁹¹ This is because human life is unfinished, still in the process of becoming. So, let the present account of the Christian moral exemplar not belie this fundamental

⁹⁰ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 114.

⁹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, 118. Cited by Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," 102.

reality but instead convey the work of ascent as an adventure never finished until we stand face to face. While we are still finite, let us remember that ascent is paired with *descent*, not as a curse, but an opportunity to know God *even in our finitude*. This oft-overlooked corollary circumvents the Hegelian hubris that Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus so wittingly depicts:

If a dancer could leap very high, we would admire him, but if he wanted to give the impression that he could fly—even though he could leap higher than any dancer had ever leapt before—let laughter overtake him. Leaping means to belong essentially to the earth and to respect the law of gravity so that the leap is merely the momentary, but flying means to be set free from telluric conditions, something that is reserved exclusively for winged creatures, perhaps also for inhabitants of the moon, perhaps—and perhaps that is also where the system will at long last find its true readers.⁹²

Just as “leaping means to belong essentially to the earth,” so ascending—in this life—essentially means to be on a mountain with a peak, beyond which is gravity, pulling us back down to be once more on the earth. The Christian moral exemplar anticipates eternity not by a gradual flight from reality but through the continual motion of ascending and descending, moving in faith toward God, but never in a manner avoidant of or abstracted from human limitations. Essentially, they move toward God and neighbor, two motions that cannot be divorced.

Consider our moral exemplar *par excellence* who, in Matthew's gospel, is described as returning down the mountain and healing a demon-possessed boy immediately following the account of the transfiguration (see Matthew 17:14–20). The disciples ask Jesus why they were unsuccessful in their attempts to cast out the demon. Jesus responds by rebuking their little faith, saying that if they had even the faith of a mustard seed, nothing would be impossible; they would be able to move mountains (Matthew 17:20). Here is a paradox of the one who descends in faith: they are bound to the earth and yet, through their faith, the earth is transformed. This paradox of faith becomes possible not through speculative resolution but wholehearted devotion, deeper communion with God. At the transfiguration, Peter suggests they stay on Mount Tabor (Mark 9:6), but then the Father designates Jesus as their authority, who commands this seemingly paradoxical faith in word and deed.

The end of the Christian moral exemplar cannot be apophatic because, as Louis Dupré notes, this ascension “leads nowhere unless

⁹² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vol. 1, 124. Cited by Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” 102.

in the end *the negation itself be negated*.”⁹³ Or rather, it comes to an end unless the suspension is lifted—unless the potential energy taut within it is liberated to kinetically spring into a life of Christlikeness *in this world*, a life marked by the overflow of profound faith and sacrificial love. Thus, what emerges is “a new affirmation of the finite *within* the infinite” or vice versa.⁹⁴ The Christian moral exemplar does not prize either ascent or descent above the other—nor the individual or the universal. Instead, they prize Christ, in whom they find these in deeper communion, in whose life both ascent and descent are exemplified, and who thereby makes possible a union with God that embraces both individual and universal.

What Dupré calls the *new affirmation* is exemplified in descent. Abraham suspends the universal, but in doing so returns down Moriah with a fuller sense of the individual life of faith. Likewise, Moses suspends the individual, but returns down Sinai with a revealed code of law for the Israelite people. Christ suspends both, resurrecting the possibility of union with God for the individual person and all of humanity. Dupré notes that “it is as *creature* and not only as uncreated essence that the creature manifests transcendence: God is the ultimate dimension of the finite reality, the inaccessible in the accessible.”⁹⁵ The ascent is always oriented toward a fuller love of neighbor, a life lived in closer obedience to God’s law, and so on. The experience of divine mystery does not sequester off from responsibilities to neighbor and God, but rather hurls deeper into them.

Hence, the Christian moral exemplar is discovered not only in summiting the mountain, but also in descending, returning with a superlative vision for the moral life. This dual movement culminates in the life of Christ, who engaged perfectly in both the mystery and revelation of God—moving from mountaintops to valleys, each enriching the other as he brought about God’s will. Evelyn Underhill describes this work of descent beautifully when she says:

It is the peculiarity of the Unitive Life that it is often lived, in its highest and most perfect forms, *in the world*; and exhibits its works before the eyes of men. As the law of our bodies is “earth to earth” so, strangely enough, is the law of our souls. The spirit of man having at last come to full consciousness of reality, completes the circle of Being; and returns

⁹³ Louis Dupré, “Negative Theology and Affirmation of the Finite,” in *Experience, Reason, and God* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 149. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Dupré, “Negative Theology and Affirmation of the Finite,” 150.

⁹⁵ Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension: A Search for the Meaning of Religious Attitudes* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 524–525. Quoted by Dupré himself in “Negative Theology and Affirmation of the Finite,” 150. Emphasis in the original.

to fertilize those levels of existence from which it sprang.⁹⁶

Our souls return to those “levels of existence from which [they] sprang” with ecstatic love and union, growing more intimate with that eternal mystery in and through the faith we receive in Christ. The Christian moral exemplar does not remain in their cloud of unknowing but precipitates again unto the earth, watering the creation our God called good, the creation to which Christ shall return.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to bolster Zagzebski’s EMT by presenting a version teleologically rooted in Jesus Christ, *the* moral exemplar, in relation to whom all others are to be defined. Christ is taken to be both the moral exemplar *par excellence* and the one who makes the theory of moral exemplarity tenable. He does so first through his *sui generis* status as fully God and fully human, utterly perfect and yet a human life, available for imitation. He moreover makes EMT theoretically possible in the union he effects between individuality and universality, whereby they are reconciled and yet not synthesized. The dynamic tension that exists between them continues to animate the moral life, but in looking to the person of Christ, that tension no longer indicates an impossibility. It points, rather, to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, union through Christ, and nearness of God. Though in this life we cannot comprehend this reconciliation, we experience it in our daily lives—through the decisions we make, the relationships we foster, and the commitments we uphold. This union allows Zagzebski’s theory to maintain its emphasis on the first-person reasoning of individual human emotion without losing the capacity to be reasoned about critically in and across communities.

To demonstrate how rooting EMT in Christ accomplishes this, I explored in turn the ascents of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, analyzing the acts particular to their significance for the moral life. The purpose of this was less an exercise in biblical exegesis and more an evaluation of how two majorly relevant and influential interpretations—Kierkegaard’s and Pseudo-Dionysius’s—relate to one another, the work of Christ, and thereby an EMT rooted in Christ. These accounts and their intersection were of particular interest to this project because of what they communicate about the axes of individuality and universality—their epistemic and practical roles in moral theology. After exploring Kierkegaard’s famous notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical and its presence in Abraham’s binding of Isaac, I demonstrated a kind of inverse in the Dionysian account of

⁹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 377. Emphasis mine.

Moses's ascent up Sinai: Abraham cannot rationalize his action to others, Moses cannot rationalize his action to himself, and yet both are called to those acts by God. Finally, I elucidated how this dynamic tension, experienced from either side by Abraham and Moses, is expressed most fully in Christ. This, I argue, is especially revealed in the transfiguration, wherein the telos of Christ's mission and consequently the telos of all human persons becomes clear: we are to be in and oriented to union with God, as individuals and an entire people.

Finally, I brought together these three accounts of ascent by analyzing their unifying virtue, motive, end, and act, four categories Zagzebski uses to define a class of exemplars. I identified their foundational virtue as faith, their motive as ecstatic love, their end as union with God, and their act as ascent/descent. Through this examination, I discovered that the Christian moral exemplar becomes capacious to embrace both the individual and universal axes through their imitation of and movement towards Christ, in whom union with God is perfected and made possible. Like Christ, the Christian moral exemplar does not remain on the mountain peak. Instead, their union with God moves them to descend again, affirming the goodness and beauty of God in and through creaturely existence in an entirely new way. Like Henri de Lubac's description of Alyosha's mystical experience, the Christian exemplar's ecstatic loving ascent "is supernatural, but the cosmos is transfigured with [them]."⁹⁷

To be sure, what I provide here is not a system. In keeping with Zagzebski's notion of moral theories, I have sought merely to provide a map. This map bolsters Zagzebski's in two ways, both by virtue and as a consequence of an important addition: taking Jesus Christ as the map's compass rose. Namely, it has attempted to give Zagzebski's map the conceptual tools for addressing the epistemic issues inherent to its account of identifying moral exemplars. Further, it has attempted to demonstrate the kind of exemplarity which emerges. This retracing of Zagzebski's map has not attempted to convince non-Christians that they ought to adopt EMT with Christocentric contours. Rather, it has intended to demonstrate—to Christians especially, but hopefully non-Christians alike—that exemplarist moral theory is uniquely improved by centering itself around the person of Jesus Christ. **M**

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⁹⁷ Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 390.